Kid Stuff - Cutting Cots, Picking Prunes

By John Rico

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THE GREAT SOLANO FACE-LIFT - The annual crop report for Solano County has just been released by the office of Agricultural Commissioner Richard Lawley. Although the gross volume in production for 1978 fell about $2 million below the 1977 figure, the $98.3 million for 1978 was impressive.

It was not too many years back when a $50 million gross figure was a high mark for agricultural production in one year in the county.

It has been repeated time and time again that the great face-lift of the county was accomplished with the completion of the Monticello project, which created Lake Berryessa. Water from that lake has made possible extensive row crop farming, transforming thousands of arid acres into fields planted to a variety of row crops.

Not too many years back Solano County, especially the Vacaville area, was known nation-wide for the quantity and quality of fresh fruits produced. The name of “Vacaville,” stamped on tens of thousands of crates or boxes of these fresh fruits, could be found in many eastern cities. Easterners looked upon Vacaville as a utopia for fruit production.

The overall picture of Solano County today is one of diversification - a combination of agriculture, industry, residential.

Having been reared in a fruit producing family, I can speak of personal experiences of some of the joys, but mostly heartbreaks of a family attempting to eke out a living on a diversified fruit ranch. I would have to label such an operation as one which breeds perpetual slavery.

There was never an idle moment for parents and children in attempting to operate such a fruit ranch. On a diversified fruit ranch you could start with cherry harvest in early May and end up picking walnuts in late September.

In recent years fruit growers have banded together into co-ops, offering a more stable procedure for disposing of their products. It was a common practice in the early days of the fruit industry for growers to be placed into the category of “gamblers.” Throughout the winter and early spring months; and continuing into the seasons for the drying of apricots, peaches and prunes, the grower had no inkling as to just what price the
products would bring.

I can well remember my father, as well as many other growers, going through the tedious process of picking, packing and shipping fresh fruits to eastern markets, only to receive an invoice later, telling him that due to over-supply the fruit had to be sold at a loss - not enough money to cover the cost of the freight, commission and containers.

The summer months in Vacaville were days of work for children. Apricot picking, and cutting; along with gathering the prunes, almonds and walnuts, were “kid’s” stuff. Thousands of youngsters found employment in these endeavors.

Those golden dried apricot halves prominently displayed in gift packages, traveled through some tough and rugged experiences before ending up in that gift pack.

Most cutting sheds on fruit ranches had no doors or windows. The winds would howl, and dust covered the freshly-cut halves. The sulphured fruit was spaced on trays which were spread upon the ground, gathered more dust.

Apricot and peach cutting were tedious jobs. During the cutting seasons these cut-fests were a time of work, and much play, along with mischief.

Anyone could qualify as a peach or apricot cutter. Be it male or female, the job demanded no skill. It was a monotonous four movement action - pick up the apricot, cut it, removed the pit and deposit the two halves on a wooden tray. This went on hour after hour, day after day, and in an atmosphere of pesky flies. Growers purposely delayed apricot and peach harvest to the zenith of sweetness, which meant the juices ran freely, covering hands, clothes, trays.

The grower had his apricots cut and dried, his peach crop was also completed, as well as his dried prunes being stored away in the cutting shed or barn, awaiting the day when a buyer would be on hand to make an offer. Twelve months of effort had gone into getting those fruits into salable condition. Now came the time to barter for a half cent, or one cent more per pound for those products. The final hour had arrived. Would the crop bring enough money to tide the family over for another 12 months.

There was many a season in which I, my brothers and sisters, along with many other children, could not answer the first bell when school opened in September for the fall season. We were too busy picking prunes and walnuts - school could wait.

Despite the many heartbreaks endured by the fruit farmer, it can be said that the children did enjoy their outings to the various ranches in an endeavor to help salvage the crops and to bring home a few dollars for spending money.
Who will forget the apricot throwing fights, when the golden ripe fruit swished through the sheds. Then there were the waiting lines at the lone outhouse, and the sticky fingers covered with fruit juice which had mixed with dirt to turn brownish-black.

No one who ever worked on a fruit ranch will ever forget having access to the sugar-sweet slab apricots that had to be chiseled from the wood drying trays.

When I was a youngster, our family lived in Colorado. My father had returned from a visit to Vacaville and had stored a quantity of fresh figs in a bag so that all of the children could see and then taste a fruit that had never before reached the small Colorado town. I took one of the figs to school and placed it on my desk. The inquisitive teacher wanted to know just what this strange fruit could be: “It’s a fresh fig from Vacaville, California,” she said, holding it up for observation by the other students in the class.